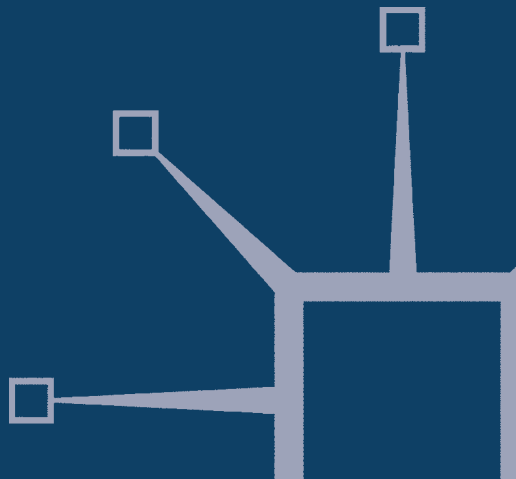


# The Balance of Power in World History

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Edited by  
Stuart J. Kaufman, Richard Little and  
William C. Wohlforth



# The Balance of Power in World History

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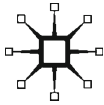
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# 1

## Introduction: Balance and Hierarchy in International Systems

*William C. Wohlforth, Stuart J. Kaufman and Richard Little*

The balance of power is one of the most influential ideas in international relations (IR). No theoretical concept has been the subject of as much scholarly inquiry and none is more likely to fall from the lips of foreign policy analysts and practitioners. This continued fascination with the balance of power is understandable, for it appears as central to scholarly debates about the basic properties of international systems as it is to policy debates over responses to US primacy in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yet it has never been systemically and comprehensively examined in premodern or non-European contexts – and therefore it has never been considered in the context of previous cases of unipolarity. Balance-of-power theory and policy analysis thus rest on profoundly unbalanced empirical foundations. Almost everything we think we know about the balance of power is the product of modern European history and the global experience of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

This book redresses this imbalance. We present eight new case studies of balancing and balancing failure in premodern and non-European international systems. Our collective, multidisciplinary and international research effort yields an inescapable conclusion: much of the conventional wisdom about the balance of power does not survive contact with non-European evidence.

Given the foundational role of balance-of-power thinking in the evolution of the academic study of international relations, it is vital to be clear about the specific aspects addressed here. Fifty years after Ernst Haas (1953) identified eight different definitions of ‘balance of power,’ the concept remains so fiercely contested that the unmodified term is too ambiguous to be meaningful. To clarify our goal, some explanation is needed.

## 2 *The Balance of Power in World History*

Consider this deceptively simple statement from the 2002 United States National Security Strategy document: 'We seek ... to create a balance of power that favors human freedom' (Bush, 2002). Haas (1953) identified four different ways of using the 'balance of power,' and all four are apparent here. First, as is made clearer elsewhere in the document, the statement is *descriptive*, identifying an international distribution of power in which the United States is the dominant state. Second, it is *prescriptive*, indicating that this particular state of affairs (American pre-eminence) should be maintained. Third, it is *normative* or *propagandistic* associating American pre-eminence with the moral good (human freedom). Finally, it is implicitly *analytical*, with the 'balance of power' representing the central mechanism in the operation of the international system; that is it assumes that creating 'a balance of power that favors human freedom' is the critical step in promoting the goal of freedom. These different uses of the phrase are usually intertwined because for propagandistic purposes they are mutually dependent, even though they are analytically distinct.

The element of propaganda is very evident in Bush's use of balance of power terminology because he wants to convince his audience that all the great powers favor freedom and have formed a grand coalition against those elements of the international system that are opposed to freedom. It follows that the other great powers should not be concerned about US pre-eminence or by its decision to enhance its capabilities because they are all part of a common coalition. Unsurprisingly, other great powers do not share this assessment. For some of them, American pre-eminence represents a serious problem with the established balance of power. The French Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine asserted in 1999, for example, that 'the entire foreign policy of France...is aimed at making the world of tomorrow composed of several poles, not just one' (cited in Walt, 2002).

What makes the debate about the balance of power so complex is that scholars, like statesmen, are also in dispute about what is meant by the balance of power. Some scholars, as Haas (1953) noted, consider 'the balance of power' to be virtually identical with the notion of power politics or with the international struggle for power – in short, they consider it identical to realism. Other complications arise when the focus is on the contemporary system because unipolarity is such a recent development and indeed is often regarded as unique in the modern world. Some realists worry, for example, that US unilateralism is now fragmenting the putative grand coalition in favor of freedom. Though there is no consensus amongst the great powers in favor of

'hard balancing' the United States by establishing a countervailing military alliance, it is argued that there is now evidence of the great powers agreeing on less extreme measures to encourage the United States to rein in its unilateralism – a phenomenon described as 'soft balancing' (see, e.g., Pape, 2005; Paul, 2005).

Critics, however, argue that this move represents what Giovanni Sartori (1970) dubbed 'concept misformation' or 'concept stretching' – essentially, stretching a term to refer to a phenomenon entirely distinct from the one it previously meant. As Lieber and Alexander (2005) note, behaviors labeled 'soft balancing' are fundamentally different from traditional balancing, and are instead 'identical to traditional diplomatic friction'. From the critics' point of view, the underlying logical error is to conflate balance-of-power theory's analytical insight (balancing tends to occur) with a particular descriptive position (that must be what is happening now). Balance of power terminology is particularly prone to such concept stretching because the term was already so elastic and diverse in meaning, but such stretching creates the risk of turning the concept into what British statesman Richard Cobden labeled it almost two centuries ago: 'a chimera: It is not a fallacy, a mistake, an imposture – it is an undescribed, indescribable, incomprehensible nothing' (quoted in Haas, 1953: 443).

### **The aim of this book**

Once we distinguish among these uses of the term balance of power, the purpose of this book can be stated succinctly: to assess the central analytical and descriptive claims of systemic balance-of-power theory. Haas (1953: 449–50) notes that some scholars, such as Spykman (1942), use 'balance of power' descriptively (as the Bush Administration did for propaganda reasons) to refer to a 'balance of power' in favor of some state – in other words, to refer to some form of hegemony. That is clearly the minority position however; for most American scholars trained in the Cold War era it refers descriptively to equilibrium, or relative equality of power between two or more states. Analytically, according to a careful review by Levy, the core notion of balance-of-power theory is 'that hegemones do not form in multistate systems because perceived threats of hegemony over the system generate balancing behavior by other leading states in the system' (Levy, 2004: 37). Theory based on this notion is the one we term *systemic* balance-of-power theory.

We focus on systemic balance-of-power theory because of its central importance to international relations theory and practice. As Levy and

Thompson note in another review, its central claim ‘has been one of the most widely held propositions in the field of international relations’ (2005: 1–2). Indeed, the assumption – made most explicitly in Waltz’s seminal *Theory of International Politics* (1979), but widely held by realists (Levy, 2004; Levy and Thompson, 2005) – is that this proposition is universally valid across time and space. Furthermore, this view that balance is the historical norm is the source of the widespread expectation, among scholars and practitioners alike, that states will soon begin balancing against the United States; and of the assessment, most starkly stated by Waltz (2000a: 56), that ‘the present condition of international politics is unnatural.’ Even liberal institutionalists and constructivists (Nye, 2003; Lebow, 2004), when arguing for restraint in US foreign policy, cite the expectation of counterbalancing by other states as a reason for their prescription.

The purpose of this study is therefore to test the logic and universality of balance-of-power theory against premodern evidence: the analytical statement that hegemonic threats tend to evoke balancing behavior as the dominant response in international systems; and the descriptive statement that ‘balances’ of power (as distinct from hegemonic or unipolar distributions of power) are as a result the most common state of international systems. Nicholas Spykman and George Bush notwithstanding, we distinguish theories of hegemony as competing with theories of balance. Far from attacking realism, however, these analyses offer an assessment of balance-of-power theory largely from within the realist paradigm, assessing how, why and how frequently the alternative outcomes of balance and hegemony have historically emerged.

‘Balance of power’ theories that assert that the balance is associated either with peace or with war represent an entirely different literature that we do not address here. Again, Haas (1953) notes that both claims have a long pedigree. Both have been examined recently in a literature pitting an application of Organski’s power transition theory (Organski and Kugler, 1980) to all state dyads (associating dyadic imbalances of power with peace) against the ‘balance of power’ assertion that parity in power is associated with peace for all state dyads (see, e.g., Tammen *et al.*, 2000; Lemke, 2002; Moul, 2002). While we have doubts about the appropriateness of applying the balance-of-power idea in this way, we merely note here that such an application constitutes a fundamentally different theory from the ones we examine, considering a different dependent variable (peace rather than balance) and a different independent variable (dyadic rather than systemic distribution of capabilities).

We examine the issues of systemic balancing in a series of case studies of international systems with which most scholars of international relations are barely familiar: the Iron Age Fertile Crescent, Warring States China, pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, Ancient India, Greece and Persia, ascending Rome, and the early modern East Asian system. We focus on these cases because such a focus is the *only* way the largest claims of systemic balance-of-power theory can be tested. Balance-of-power theory was originally developed to explain the modern European international system on the basis of evidence from that system. Therefore, while further studies based on that evidence – for example, certain recent process-tracing studies (see Wohlforth, 2003) – can be used to disconfirm the theory, or to confirm its applicability in the European context, it cannot be used to confirm the theory's applicability to any other international system, including the contemporary one.

Since evidence from the contemporary system is inconclusive – we do not yet know what sort of 'balance,' if any, will exist 20 or 50 years from now – the only way to test the theory is with evidence from systems separate from the modern European one and its contemporary successor. We must, in short, broaden the empirical domain in which such theories are tested. The chapters that follow demonstrate that the cases we study *were* all interstate systems to which many international relations theories *do* apply. Most particularly, Waltz's overall hypothesis about interstate systems applies: 'hegemony leads to balance,' Waltz (1993: 77) writes; and it has done so 'through all of the centuries we can contemplate'. Since the claims of systemic balance-of-power theory are transhistorical, they can only be tested transhistorically.

This is our objective. Following the pioneering efforts of English School scholars such as Wight and Watson, and building on a growing emerging body of scholarship on the international politics of non-European international systems (Buzan and Little, 2000; Cioffi-Revilla, 1996; Cioffi-Revilla and Landman, 1999; Kaufman, 1997; Modelski and Thompson, 1999; Wilkinson, 1999, 2002), we bring new evidence to bear on the central problems of balance and hierarchy. The cases in this book collectively survey a large swath of known human history to assess whether the core claims of systemic balance-of-power theory are accurate: that 'balance' understood as multipolar or bipolar distributions of power is the typical state of international systems, and that this has remained so historically because states in such systems engage in balancing behavior in response to hegemonic threats. Against these hypotheses we test the competing notion of hegemonic stability – the



notion that hegemony or hierarchy is the typical state of the international system – associated both with scholars such as Gilpin (1981) from the realist camp and with English School theorists such as Watson (1992). In the conclusion we test these raw empirical claims against a larger quantitative database that covers the majority of known international history.

## **Theorizing international systems**

Beyond simply assessing outcomes, however, our case studies focus on assessing competing theoretical claims about the causes of these outcomes. When balanced – multipolar or bipolar – systems remain stable (i.e., durable), what are the causes of this stability? When they collapse into hegemony or empire, what are the causes of the hegemonic rise? Because our authors represent a diverse set of theoretical traditions, we collectively draw on a large toolkit of concepts that might help explain these outcomes.

### **Definitions**

We begin with Bull and Watson's (1984: 1) definition that a group of states comprise a system when 'the behavior of each is a necessary factor in the calculations of others.' Recognizing that systems are not always simply anarchic, however, we reject the North American tendency, among rationalists (Lake, 1996) and constructivists (Wendt and Friedheim, 1995) alike, to understand anarchy and hierarchy as mutually exclusive. Instead, we use as a starting point Adam Watson's (1992) notion of degrees of hierarchy, ranging from pure anarchy through hegemony, suzerainty and dominion to a single empire. All of our cases involve situations in which there were hierarchical relations among some units, and anarchical relations among others. Moreover, some were characterized by a relatively clear hierarchical order among *all* units comprising the system. Highlighting only the purely anarchical elements of each system would cause us to overlook the most interesting and important features of our cases – the nature of Ming suzerainty over Vietnam and Korea, for example, or the ever-changing nature of Assyrian control over neighboring Babylonia. Explaining the propensity of each system towards balance or its opposite demands that we consider degrees of systemic hierarchy within anarchy, just as Watson proposed.

The Roman Empire is considered the archetype of a situation in which a single empire dominates an entire international system.

However, even the Roman Empire faced neighbors outside its hierarchical control, ranging from the Pictish tribes of Scotland to the larger German tribes and the highly advanced Parthian Empire. If that system is classed as simply 'anarchic', then nothing is excluded by the term, so it has no analytical meaning. Our rule of thumb has to be that if a single unit achieves political-military domination over most of an international system, that system is primarily hierarchic rather than anarchic, and is classified as such. The extent of hierarchy, its different types, and the longevity of different types of hierarchies are the key issues addressed in the chapters that follow.

This conceptual approach – looking for systems that may be mostly rather than entirely hierarchical – is consistent with a useful distinction made by Michael Doyle. International systems theory, Doyle (1986: 40) writes, typically takes 'hegemony ... to mean controlling leadership of the international system as a whole'. Following Doyle, we define it as effective control by one unit over the foreign policy of another. The value of this shift is that it turns the question of hegemony from a question of yes or no to a more useful question of more or less: over *how much* of the system does a state exercise hegemony? This move avoids fights over definitional matters and shifts analytical focus to the empirical question of the shape and behavior of the system. It also opens up the possibility of systems characterized by dual or multiple hegemonies, which might differ from bipolar or multipolar systems that include a large number of small, independent actors.

Second, how do we classify the varied units whose interaction constitutes the system? Part of the difficulty in understanding systems, ancient or modern, is merely determining *what* the units are, not only their mutual relationships. After 1990, for example, should Hezbollah be considered a unit in the international system (acting, e.g., as Israel's main adversary to the north); or should it be understood as part of the Lebanese state, or simply as a tool of Syrian or Iranian policy? Similar questions are ubiquitous in ancient systems as well, concerning the Chaldaean tribes of southern Babylonia, the colonies of Greek city-states, Rome's client kingdoms, or the republics within India's Vajjian confederacy, among others. Our rule of thumb is to consider as international actors those that acted autonomously in interstate interactions, especially if they controlled military force.

### **The logic of balancing**

Given the early stage of our endeavor, we do not attempt to offer a complete theory that explains variation in the balancing propensity of

systems. Instead, we draw on a toolkit of hypotheses drawn from a variety of theories. An encouraging aspect of this project is that, though we approach the subject from different theoretical perspectives, we generally found it necessary to mix and match concepts in a way that bodes well for future theoretical synthesis. Thus in explaining the stability of the early modern Asian state-system, Kang incorporates the raw distribution of power (a la neorealism), commercial and material interests (liberalism), the effects of Chinese identity (the key constructivist concern) and the notion of systemic hierarchy (a central English School insight). Little, in contrast, focused on showing the value of English School insights, finds that neorealist logic is also useful for explaining some dynamics. Following Victoria Hui (2005), we organize the theoretical approaches according to the overall effect of the factors they identify, distinguishing those emphasizing 'the logic of balancing' from those emphasizing 'the logic of domination' which leads to hierarchy. We begin with the logic of balancing.

*Neorealist theory.* The starting point of both the logic of balancing and the logic of domination is the standard realist proposition that because states pursue power as a means to security, they frequently tend to expand (Morgenthau, 1978; Mearsheimer, 2001; Layne, 2006). Indeed if international anarchy does generate a security dilemma, the most sensible way to address the resulting insecurity is to expand a state's territory, as both buffer and power base, by any means necessary. Mearsheimer's (2001: 238) summary makes the point succinctly: 'great powers strive for hegemony in their region of the world' – meaning, for ancient systems confined to one region, they strive for systemic hegemony. Furthermore, this tendency applies to second-rank powers as well: they, too, have an incentive to 'bandwagon for profit' (Schweller, 1994) to expand their power – not to mention to establish good relations with neighboring larger powers. This process alone provides a robust explanation for why empires tend to rise in so many times and places.

Naturally, as neorealist theory emphasizes, the rise of any given great power poses a threat to the security of others (Jervis, 1978). In a balanced multipolar system, this creates little problem, as great powers can maintain their relative position through a system of compensation (Gulick, 1955: 70–2). However, under unbalanced multipolarity – that is, when one great power emerges as a potential systemic hegemon – its growth in power poses a potential threat to the independence of all the other states (Mearsheimer, 2001). Under these conditions, balance-of-power theory suggests that great powers, and indeed many lesser

powers, should band together to balance against the rising potential hegemon.

According to an insightful typology suggested by Jack Levy (2003), there are at least four distinct systemic balance-of-power theories in common use. The theory may be unconditional, applying to any and all states systems (e.g., Waltz, 1979), or it may be conditional, applying only to contiguous state-systems lacking offshore balancers. This distinction is not important for our study: most of the systems we examine are contiguous most of the time, so evidence from them is pertinent to both the conditional and the unconditional versions. More important is the distinction between balance of power and balance of threat (Walt, 1987) versions of the theory. These different logics yield quite different expectations about state behavior, and so require additional discussion.

The key issue is what constitutes balancing. Keeping in mind that we are examining systemic rather than dyadic balance-of-power theory, we assert that a state is balancing in this sense only if its action is aimed at checking a potential systemic hegemon. As Christopher Layne (2004: 106) observes, 'the concept of balancing expresses the idea of a counterweight, specifically, the ability to generate sufficient material capabilities to match – or offset – those of a would-be, or actual, hegemon.' External balancing, then, is alliance making or other substantive interstate cooperation that is aimed at preventing hegemony. If a state allies with the potential hegemon against a regional rival, this is not 'balancing' against the regional rival, but bandwagoning with the potential hegemon (Walt, 1987). For a systemic balance of power to be maintained, states must put aside secondary disputes when faced with the common threat of a single rival that might conquer and destroy them all. Only this behavior can lead to the outcome of balance predicted by the theory. This hegemonic threat will inevitably be the most powerful state in the system, not necessarily the state most threatening to any particular rival: systemic balancing theory is, therefore, balance-of-power theory, not balance-of-threat theory.

The other type of balancing Waltz mentions is internal balancing, enhancement of a state's power in response to a potential hegemon. In Waltz's rendition of the theory, internal balancing encompasses emulation: when lesser powers adopt technologies, institutions and practices from the leading state to compete more effectively. The theory expects emulation to increase with the probability of hegemony. Theorists of hegemony note a similar phenomenon, observing 'a historical

tendency for the military and economic techniques of the dominant state or empire to be diffused to other states in the system' (Gilpin, 1981: 176; cf. Cipolla, 1965; McNeill, 1963). However, while hegemonic theories see such processes as undermining hegemony after their rise, balance-of-power theory would expect them generally to work against the emergence of hegemony in the first place.

In assessing balance-of-power theory, we adopt the broadest approach most favorable to the theory, which means considering both *outcome* and *process*. In the European context, most scholars see the outcome as roughly balanced but question whether it is the result of the causal processes identified in balance-of-power theory – that is, alliance formation, internal balancing, and emulation. Hence, insisting that the theory predicts outcomes looks like an attempt to insulate it from empirical disconfirmation. In our cases the brute outcome over and over again is hegemony, not balance, so refusing to examine balancing processes would amount to instant disconfirmation. We thus go on to see whether that outcome occurred *despite* balancing processes. That is, the theory might be wrong about the outcome but right about the basic processes the threat of hegemony elicits. Those processes may simply have been overwhelmed in our cases by causes exogenous to the theory.

Recognizing the insights of collective action theory regarding states' temptation to pass the buck or to bandwagon in the face of hegemonic threats, balance of power theorists have suggested two ancillary hypotheses to account for variation in states' responses. First, whether a given state chooses to balance or pass the buck depends in large part on geography (Mearsheimer, 2001). The potential hegemon's neighbors are more likely to balance than are states further away, because contiguity lowers the costs and raises the benefits of balancing. By exploiting the military advantages of the defensive, a state can balance against a possible offensive by its potentially hegemonic neighbor relatively cheaply, while its incentive to do so is high because as a neighbor, it is the most likely victim of hegemonic expansion. Distant states, in contrast, can rely on those incentives to force states neighboring the potential hegemon to pay the costs of balancing. Moreover, balancing is more expensive for them because they have to pay to move their forces in range of the distant potential hegemon.

Second, states that are very weak will hide from or bandwagon with the potential hegemon. The greater a state's relative power (defined as the capability to balance the hegemon), the more likely it is to balance. Only the weakest and most geographically vulnerable states, whose marginal contribution to containing the hegemon is negligible, should

bandwagon. For stronger states, bandwagoning materially increases the probability of hegemony and thus the possibility that the state might lose its sovereignty. The strongest regional actors are the most likely to be able to balance. States whose power falls in the middle of this range should prefer to balance if the threat is high, but may not be able to. If not, they can be expected to follow ambiguous hedging strategies that allow them to cooperate with the potential hegemon even as they encourage other states to pay the costs of balancing it.

*System Expansion.* Another factor that helps maintain the balance of power is the introduction of new powers into the international system (Dehio, 1962; Thompson, 1996; Buzan and Little, 2000). As Dehio pointed out, the balance of power in modern Europe was maintained by the repeated introductions of marchland powers – Russia and the US, most notably – to balance against the rise of states in the system's core. In systems that have land borders, this can be expected to be a systematic process: as states annex marchland states, bordering tribes that may previously have been geographically outside the system will be exposed to pressure from the neighboring empire. That pressure creates incentives for the tribes to emulate the empire by forming state structures (Waltz, 1979; Buzan, Jones and Little, 1993), thus expanding the boundaries of the system further into previously irrelevant areas. At the same time, groups in the geographic region that had previously not loomed as necessary in the calculations of states in the system might come to be so, thus 'entering' the system functionally. The effect is to create obstacles to an empire's further expansion, if not re-creating a genuine balance of power.

*Particularist Identities.* Some constructivists (e.g., Kaufman, 1997) and English School theorists (Jackson, 1990) argue that particularist unit identities, and international norms that respect them, can be an important element in the maintenance of a balance of power. Clearly people attached to their own local identity are likely to resist imperial control more fiercely than are people with no such attachment. Empires that conquer such people are therefore likely to face frequent rebellions, be relatively unstable, and as a result are relatively unlikely to succeed in achieving hegemony. If international norms respect such identities, then the effect should be stronger. Robert Jackson (1990) argues, for example, that international acceptance of the norm of national self-determination, in addition to the strength of nationalist sentiment itself, was a critical factor driving the dissolution of European colonial empires (and of the collective European hegemony in Asia and Africa) in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*Government type.* Though royal autocracy was by far the most common type government across the ancient world, the democracies and oligarchies of Greece, Republican Rome, and some of the more or less ‘republican’ states of India, provide enough variety in those cases to make it possible to consider the effects of government type on international systems – and *vice versa*. However, as Deudney (forthcoming) notes, ancient democracies and republics were invariably small, inherently vulnerable to imbalances of power when confronted with imperial adversaries. Deudney asserts that ancient republics could compensate for their small size and power through ‘co-binding’ – forming stable confederations that enable them to aggregate their power to defend themselves against the encroachment of expansionist neighbors. Nevertheless, to the extent that the component republics maintained their independence, collective action problems in their co-binding would still remain.

### **The logic of domination**

*Hegemonic Transition Theory.* Though most realists subscribe to systemic balance-of-power theory, the logic of realism does not require this conclusion. In *War and Change in World Politics* (1981), Robert Gilpin proposes a realist theory of international systems that places the concept of hegemony at the center of analysis. Offering a cost-benefit analysis approach similar in many ways to the later neorealist-neoliberal synthesis, Gilpin argued that it would repeatedly occur that states would seek to expand and achieve hegemony because the benefits of doing so would, at least at first, exceed the costs. In short, Gilpin endorses the offensive realist insight about the benefits of military expansion but not the logic of balancing.

The reasons for this conclusion are multiple. First, Gilpin (1981: 55–84) theorized, advances in transportation, communications and military technology would diminish states’ ‘loss-of-strength gradient’, making it easier for expansionist power to seize and hold new territory, reducing the costs of hegemony. Second, military expansion tended in the past to yield multiple economic benefits: economies of scale in providing security, the internalization of externalities (such as tolls levied on trade), and methods of overcoming the problem of diminishing returns by increasing inputs. Third, power and wealth in agricultural societies followed directly from the control of agricultural land so, *ceteris paribus*, larger states were necessarily stronger and richer. As a result, Gilpin (1981: 111) writes, ‘World politics was characterized by the rise and decline of powerful empires...The recurrent pattern in

every civilization of which we have knowledge was for one state to unify the system under its imperial domination’.

*The English School.* A core proposition of the English School and of constructivism is the centrality of ideas to the behavior of any international system. Thus English School theorists emphasize that a key reason for the stability of the European balance of power was the fact that it was normatively approved: this is, indeed, the source of contemporary assumptions that the ‘balance of power’ is somehow good. Butterfield and Wight insisted, therefore, that there was no balance-of-power system in the ancient world because the idea of the balance of power did not exist. Similarly, Adam Watson’s (1992) magisterial survey of international systems places great emphasis on the ideas concerning hegemony or equilibrium that animated different interstate cultures.

This work suggests the hypothesis that the propensity of any system of states towards balance or hierarchy is a function of the ideas that animate the culture of the international society they form. From this perspective, Alexander Wendt’s constructivist argument about varying cultures of anarchy is much less bold than the English School upon which it draws, for the latter not only posits but claims to have identified stable *hierarchical* cultures of anarchy – ruled out by Wendt in deference to Waltz’s rigid dichotomy between anarchy and hierarchy. A stable hierarchy, by contrast, might arise in an international society with a cultural system demanding that one polity – even perhaps not the strongest one – serve as leader.

In their sweeping consideration of these issues, Buzan and Little (2000) (relying on Watson, 1992) emphasize the English School view that the typical result is some form of hierarchy. International systems, English School theorists point out, typically show a substantial degree of hierarchy, whether in the form of hegemony, suzerainty, or full-fledged empire. One explanation for the emergence and stability of interstate hierarchy is material capabilities. The larger the underlying inequalities among great powers – size, population, natural resource endowments, potential for military power and economic output – and the more these inequalities lead to clear distinctions among ranks, the more likely hierarchical patterns are to emerge and remain stable.

*Collective Action Theory.* Collective action theorists would doubt even the modified hypotheses about balancing promoted by contemporary neorealists. Balancing, from this perspective, is a collective good which should be chronically under-provided in an anarchical environment (Olson, 1965). Those states for which the threat is more distant may be



inclined not only to pass the buck to frontline states, but even to bandwagon with the rising state, seeking compensation instead of blocking the opponent's expansion (Christensen and Snyder, 1990; Mearsheimer, 2001; Schroeder, 1994). Frontline states, if faced with overwhelming force from the rising state, may choose to bandwagon as well, submitting to a milder form of hegemony instead of risking annihilation. These competing systemic incentives, combined with the temptations created by local rivalries, will tend to interfere with the balancing process, rendering it slow and inefficient. The result may be to allow one state to gain enough power to reach hegemony before its rivals coalesce to stop it.

A related and reinforcing factor is uncertainty about the identity and gravity of the hegemonic threat. Decades of cumulating research on decision-making would predict pervasive uncertainty *ex ante* concerning such issues that would exacerbate the other system- and unit-level barriers to balancing (e.g., Gilovich, 2002; Kahneman *et al.*, 1982). Furthermore, in an international system as conceived by offensive realists, all great powers can be expected to aspire to hegemonic status. As a result, there should often be multiple hegemonic threats, so any move aimed at balancing against one may end up benefiting another. The situation is most obvious in cases in which a hegemon arises as a challenger to a previous hegemon: efforts to balance the old hegemon may pave the way for the rise of the new one. This effect may be exacerbated by geography: since distance attenuates threat, states may reasonably choose to align with a stronger but more distant power against a slightly weaker but closer (and more immediately threatening) one – and find that they have enabled the hegemonic threat to overcome its most powerful rival.

Finally, as Hui (2005) emphasizes, the strategic challenges that face balancers provide strategic opportunities to aspiring hegemons. Expansionist powers can exploit collective action problems by offering selective incentives for some potential balancers to buckpass or bandwagon instead – feeding and benefiting from their temptation to 'bandwagon for profit' (Schweller, 1994). Such opportunities suggest that, for a state that has the potential to achieve hegemony – that is, under conditions of unbalanced multipolarity – when balancing behavior is most needed, divide-and-conquer tactics are most likely to be effective.

*Unit type.* A variable of some importance – in different ways in different systems – is unit type. The four main types of units in ancient systems, Buzan and Little (2000) note, were empires, city-states, and

nomadic and sedentary tribes. Obviously unit type matters enormously for the type of interactions they have, though not always in obvious or simple ways. Contrary to stereotype, tribal peoples, even nomadic ones, did sometimes maintain diplomatic relations with empires: one nomadic king of the Scythians even offered a marriage alliance to the Assyrian king. Similarly, unit types change in various ways: city-states could grow into empires (Babylon, Rome), or break off from them; nomadic tribes could create empires (the Medes) or conquer them (Manchus in China).

Theoretically, unit type is critical because the existence of at least one effective empire is a necessary condition for the emergence of hegemony in premodern systems. Furthermore, to the considerable extent that unit type correlates with power, the prospects for balancing a growing empire critically depend on the existence of other empires of comparable size. Given collective action problems, coalitions of city-states and tribes are likely to fragment over the long haul when confronted with an empire larger than any of them singly: as Wohlforth (1999) emphasizes, an alliance or coalition does not change the structural distribution of power in the system.

A related variable, potentially applicable to any unit type, is state disunity. As Hui (2005) argues, expansionist powers can use divide-and-conquer tactics not only against enemy coalitions, but also against enemy states (or tribes), bribing officials or playing factions off against each other to weaken and destroy target states. Thucydides's repeated references to city-states being captured by 'treachery', for example, suggests one way this can happen, especially in situations in which siege warfare plays a prominent role.

*Administrative capacity.* Since the rise and fall of empires is so centrally important to what we want to explain – the balancing propensity of systems – we also consider in detail the causes of such rises and falls. One factor of considerable importance is the social technology for state administration: empires grow larger and more stable when their rulers develop more effective techniques for governing them (Kaufman, 1997; Buzan and Little, 2000). Related is the physical and social technology for communications: the more quickly rulers can move people and messages across space, the more space they can control. One key implication is that when effective new administrative technologies are developed, international systems can change rapidly as empires exploit the new opportunity to grow.

This concept is relevant to two key variables in international relations theory. The first is Waltz's notion of 'internal balancing', and

Hui's (2005) broader related concept of 'self-strengthening reforms'. According to neorealist theory, if a powerful state engages in some major reform that increases its ability to generate and mobilize power, then its rivals should be expected to emulate that reform in order to maintain a balance of power. However, as institutionalist theorists pointed (Olson, 1965) out decades ago, there are likely to be internal political barriers to reforms that enhance state power: such reforms inevitably come at a cost to important actors inside the state who therefore have strong incentives to resist them (Buzan, Jones and Little, 1993). More broadly, various institutionalist literatures point out that increasing returns, path dependence, barriers to collective identity change, and other domestic-level institutional lags tend to raise the real costs and thus lower the supply of domestic self-strengthening reforms, and therefore of internal balancing (North, 1990; Powell and DiMaggio, 1991; March and Olsen, 1989; Schweller, 2006). Systemic theory can point out that states may be forced to adapt or perish; it cannot specify which will be the outcome, so we must look inside the units to help explain it.

A second, related effect of administrative capacity is on the cumulativeness of power in the international system, a concept sometimes considered as an element in the offense-defense balance (Quester, 1977). A recent literature debates the degree to which conquest 'pays' in the modern system, with some scholars (Bunce, 1985; Brooks, 1999) arguing that in modern times, conquests cost more to maintain than they yield in benefits to the conquering state, while others (Lieberman, 1993, 1996) maintain the opposite. But the same issue – and the same variability – existed in ancient times, as some empires were more effective than others at overcoming what Gilpin (1981) called the 'loss-of-strength gradient' and converting conquests into additional power. In general, we should expect that the more effectively states can exploit conquered resources to enhance their power – that is, the more power is cumulative in the system – the easier it will be for one state to overturn a balance of power and establish hegemony.

### **Less important factors**

*Geography.* Geography is making its way back into international relations theory. Mearsheimer (2001), most notably, relies heavily on 'the stopping power of water' in constructing his theory. One could consider several hypotheses about location. One likely geographical effect is that states less threatened by rising powers will typically be those more geographically isolated from them. A second possible hypothesis,

worthy of further exploration, is that major mountain and water barriers will tend to form state boundaries that are relatively difficult to breach.

But one immediate insight from looking at history's *longue durée* is that the effect of geography always interacts with social and physical technology. The 'stopping power of water' notwithstanding, maritime empires date back at least as far as the Minoan Empire of the second millennium BCE. Similarly, while Little finds that the Hellespont and the Aegean posed an important barrier to Persian expansion into Greece, the Romans turned the whole Mediterranean into 'Our Sea' and used it as a communications route as important as their vaunted road network. As another example, city-states thrived among the Sumerians of the Mesopotamian flatlands, and also among the Hellenes of mountainous Greece, and the former were arguably as resistant to incorporation into empires as were the latter. Compared another way, while mountainous Greece might have interfered with Greek unity, mountainous Iran did not prevent the Medes from achieving unity. The effects of geography may be important, but they are not simple, and show no consistent effect in our cases.

*Economic incentives.* David Kang's study highlights trading relationships, but Buzan and Little's economic sector of analysis is largely absent in our other analyses. This might seem surprising – Buzan and Little (2000: 234) emphasize, for example, the significance of the Assyrian silver trade in the ancient Middle East. And indeed, states in resource-poor Mesopotamia always had strong economic incentives for political-military expansion – as did the resource-poor city-states of Greece, early Rome (situated on a trade route from whence it derived its prosperity), and many others. The conclusion the authors come to, more implicitly than explicitly, is that the political-military incentives for imperial expansion were so strong that economic incentives hardly made a difference. Furthermore, the economic incentives varied less than did the political-military environment: the resources were always desirable, but not always equally conquerable. While economic variables are of undeniable importance, their exploration will have to await a future study.

*International Organizations.* One major school of thought in international relations theory, neoliberal institutionalism, is conspicuously absent from this survey. This is not due to bias on our part, but rather to the fact that neoliberal institutionalism is a quintessentially modern theory, placing at the center of analysis variables that did not become important before the 20<sup>th</sup> – or, at best, the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Premodern international relations occurred in the absence of institution-

alized regimes for international trade, monetary relations, and conflict management. Since we found no important ancient international organizations, we do not attempt to apply this theory to those cases.

### **Theoretical summary: propositions to assess**

While the chapters in this volume can be said to ‘test’ only the core assertions of balance-of-power theory – that balancing is the dominant reaction to hegemonic threat, and that the result of such behavior is systems that remain balanced – they do examine and assess a larger number of theoretical propositions developed above. As above, we group these propositions according to their systemic effect according to Hui’s (2005) classification of the ‘logic of balancing’ and the competing ‘logic of domination’.

#### **The logic of balancing**

*Outcome Hypothesis:* A balance of power, defined as a multipolar or bipolar distribution of capabilities, is the normal, ubiquitous state of all international systems. Unipolar or hegemonic systems will be inherently unstable, as balancing processes push the system back to bi- or multipolarity.

##### *Propositions about Process*

1. Unbalanced multipolarity – concentration of power in a system leader – causes competing powers to engage in internal and external balancing to check the rise of the hegemonic threat.

a. Diffusion of advanced military, economic and administrative techniques should enable rivals successfully to emulate the innovations of potential hegemons.

b. States nearer the threat are more likely to engage in balancing than are more distant states.

c. More powerful states are more likely to engage in balancing than are weaker states.

2. Should unipolarity or hegemony emerge, balancing processes (alliances, internal balancing, emulation, etc.) will emerge in tandem with the relative decline of the dominant state’s capacity to enforce its pre-eminence.

3. Imperial expansion causes the size of the international system to expand, bringing in new opponents to aspiring hegemons and ensuring the maintenance of the balance of power.